

Becoming a Trainer - Do You Have What It Takes? (Apr 06)

April 2006 - Cari McLean

The path to becoming an information technology trainer is not simply achieved through a bachelor's degree program. In fact, budding professionals with minimal or no real-world experience rarely find opportunities to train. Experienced IT professionals are the best candidates for training positions. Most organizations take a multi-pronged approach to finding qualified IT trainers. They often look at potential candidates' education and background, earned certifications, on-the-job experiences and, of course, their presentation skills.

Both DeVry University, a provider of business, technology, health care and management education, and The Training Associates, a supplier of trainer consultants to IT training and consulting organizations as well as vendor-authorized and independent training organizations, have specific requirements for potential instructors or trainers.

With 78 locations across the North America, DeVry University has to meet individual state and regional education requirements. "The first filter that a potential faculty member would have to clear would be the educational requirements, which in some states might be a determinable degree—a Ph.D. or equivalent—and in every state it is a minimum of a Master's degree to teach at the undergraduate level," said David Overbye, dean of curriculum, DeVry University. "Furthermore, in some of the states in the southern association candidates have to have 18-credit hours of graduate-level coursework that is directly applicable to the course that he or she is going to teach."

According to Overbye, once a potential candidate fulfills the individual state or regional requirements DeVry University seeks faculty members that are not only qualified academically but professionally as well. "Because we are an applications-based institution, we want our faculty members to have quality on-the-job experience in their respective fields. We don't have a hard-and-fast rule, but candidates should have three, five to seven years of practitioner experience. In other words, we tend not to hire a person that is a Ph.D. graduate and wants to be an assistant professor even though he or she has never worked in that industry," Overbye said. "We tend to look for industry experience, what kinds of things have they done in the industry, how long have worked in the industry, where they were employed, etc. However, we also look for currency. We ask them questions like, are you staying current? How are you staying current? Are you a member of any professional associations? And, what certifications do you hold?"

Although DeVry University values application-specific certifications, they value on-the-job experiences that support candidates' certifications even more. "A certification is certainly a piece of evidence," Overbye said. "Generally people who earn certifications are earning them because they are practicing that particular application on the job. You very rarely see someone that has earned, for example, a MCSE (Microsoft Certified Systems Engineer) certification but has never worked with Microsoft products. Usually, certification and on-the-job experience go hand in hand."

On the other hand, at The Training Associates, Trainer and Training Manager Mike Renzi said that certifications play a significant role in the company's hiring process. "It is important for people who are trainers not only to have a subject-matter certification but a trainer certification as well. And that could be a MCT (Microsoft Certified Trainer), a CTT+ (CompTIA Certified Trainer), etc.," Renzi said. "Certification really shows that a person has met specified criterion."

Renzi said that certifications such as the MCT and CTT+ also ensure that a person has the required skills to present the material. "If someone has the CompTIA CTT+ certification, it means that they have demonstrated and proved themselves to CompTIA and therefore will have classroom management capability, know how to position and introduce a class or course and

have good presentation skills because that is part of their coursework while earning a CTT+ certification,” Renzi explained.

At DeVry University, potential faculty members have to give mock course lectures to an audience of faculty members, administrators and deans so they can observe their presentation abilities, knowledge of the subject matter and all around demeanor. “A successful faculty member on the one hand has to be confident enough to stand up in front of a group of students and speak, but we don’t want candidates to be so confident that they come across as arrogant or distant. We like our faculty to demonstrate a positive regard for the students, so they don’t treat the students in a classic ‘I am the fuehrer and you are the follower’ kind of relationship,” Overbye said. “The fundamental two things that we need from faculty members are knowledge and an ability to transmit it.”

Overbye also said that it is common for potential faculty members—especially in the IT industry—to be strong minds and skilled professionals but weaker presenters. “Many technically competent people need to work on the way that they present themselves on the teaching stage,” Overbye explained. “Once you have your credentials in order, you have the necessary skill sets and knowledge for teaching, spend a little time on how you are going to teach. Go to conferences and deliver speeches because even with a small class—like here at DeVry with 25 to 30 students—it can be very intimidating.”

In order to develop its faculty, DeVry University sends all faculty members through its Teaching Excellence course, which focuses on the pedagogy of teaching. “This course explains how to prepare a lesson plan, how to write an exam, how to communicate information in a discussion format, how to interact with students, how to formulate homework assignments, how do you grade, etc.,” Overbye said. “We also train them on some DeVry-specific requirements as well because DeVry University is a technology forward school. So the Teaching Excellence course is primarily on the mechanics and expectations of teaching here.”

At The Training Associates, a proven positive record of accomplishment is also important. Renzi said that he asks potential trainer candidates to submit student evaluations from prior courses they taught. “Record of accomplishment is crucial for trainers that are going to be teaching a one-week class on a highly technical skill. So we ask potential trainers to submit student evaluations because it gives us insight in terms of the quality of the trainer, it will highlight some things that may give us a red flag, etc.,” Renzi said.

In the end, one thing is clear: On-the-job application-based experience is required to become a successful IT trainer. However, not one requirement alone represents the ultimate trainer. It is important that a trainer is well versed—academically fit, professionally experienced, an excellent presenter and lastly, has a passion to teach.

“The quality that any trainer must have is a passion to share their knowledge with others,” Renzi said. “If you don’t have the passion, you probably are not going to be a good trainer. However, if you do have that passion, you can certainly earn the certifications and develop the knowledge and skills for the classroom.”